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the truth about jimi hendrix and drugs.

STONED

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by eric danville

If everything goes as planned, September 18, 2000, the 30th anniversary of Jimi Hendrix's much-fabled death, will see the unveiling of a stunning tribute in Renton, Washington's Greenwood Memorial Park, near Jimi's hometown of Seattle. With architecture inspired by the song "If 6 Was 9," a nine-column structure surrounding a statue of Jimi performing at Woodstock is scheduled to be erected in the park's Greenwood Cemetery where he now rests. A total of 54 gravesites—six times nine—reserved for other members of the Hendrix family will ring the monument, serving the double duty of bringing the family together in the afterlife and saving the graves of others interred in the park from desecration by well-meaning but thoughtless Hendrix fans.

Announced in late November 1999, the memorial is the brainchild of Jimi's father, James "Al" Hendrix, who says, "A resting place for a loved one is almost always a private issue dealt with quietly by family members. However, I have always understood that Jimi in some way belongs to his fans and the world. This is something I always wished I could have done for my son, but I was not able to until now. This brings me great peace."

Al Hendrix's comments about the memorial can be found on the Jimi Hendrix Memorial Website (www.jimihendrixmemorial.com), a niche of cyberspace that's part press release, part publicity stunt and part pledge drive meant to solicit funds for the memorial's completion. Another Website feature, Steven C. Pesant's "A Closer Look at the Life of Jimi Hendrix" is more interesting for what it doesn't say. It chronicles Jimi's

life, from receiving his first \$5 guitar to his early session work as Jimmy James (backing up Ike and Tina Turner, Sam Cooke and Little Richard, among others) to leading the Experience and Band of Gypsies to laying down tracks for his final, unfinished album, *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*.

It's a touching look back, but the one thing Pesant doesn't mention is Jimi's drug use. Not once. Not even in his last line: "Unfortunately, Hendrix was unable to see the completion of this new musical vision due to his untimely death on September 18, 1970."

Ultimately, barbiturates contributed to his death, giving rise to the myth that Jimi was a junkie. Pesant does not discuss this or Jimi's LSD experiences, which fueled his role as a leader of a countercultural rock'n'roll movement bent on consciousness expansion.

Not surprisingly, there's been an effort over the past few years to clean up Jimi's public image. It's been sanitized in part by the Hendrix estate, who, since rightfully regaining control of Hendrix's music in 1995, has not only released new albums and remastered classics for fans to enjoy, but has also denied use of Jimi's music where they found it inappropriate, such as the soundtracks to films as *Summer of Sam* and *The Changeling*. But apparently, they had no aversion to peddling the rights to Jimi's signature version of the national anthem for a Pop Tarts commercial.

The not-so-subtle revisionist movement has been aided and abetted by the city of Seattle itself. In 1980, a local television station, following the lead of the First National Anti-Drug Coalition (a group with ties to right-wing extremist Lyndon LaRouche), actually called for legal action against those seeking to build a statue of Jimi, declaring, "And now Seattle is going to honor a drug addict who died of a drug overdose by using taxpayers' public land for a memorial... and thus contribute to [the] perverted hero worship of Jimi Hendrix?" Those in favor of the proposed statue later got their tribute in June, 1983—a foot-square plaque in the African Savannah section of a local zoo.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, OH isn't exactly known for its insightful look at the marriage of psychoactive substances and musical compositions either. As the music industry's standard-bearer for rock revisionism, they barely acknowledge the presence of any drugs in rock, and certainly not the positive impact that marijuana and other psychotropics have had. (A quick spin around its Website yielded zero hits for keywords "LSD" or "psychedelia.")

As it applies to Jimi Hendrix, this rock revisionism, while clearly performed in the names of political correctness and financial interest, is almost understandable in the glaring face of rock hyperbole. Unfortunately, it's history that is getting burned.

HOW EXPERIENCED WAS JIMI?

Like most rock stars in the '60s, Jimi enjoyed pot and psychedelics. Even Al Hendrix, in his book, *My Son Jimi*, says so. "Jimi said, 'Oh no, I don't do all that heavy stuff. I might have smoked a little pot sometimes, but those needles and cocaine—no way!' Jimi did tell me that he had tried some LSD. I knew a lot of the guys were doing it. I said, 'I hope you don't let that stuff overrule you.'"

"The most common misconception about Jimi is the drugs," the elder Hendrix writes. "People enhance it like he was way-out, a wild man taking drugs all the time, which he wasn't.... It's an exaggeration to connect Jimi to drug abuse. He would talk against drugs, because I asked him about them sometimes."

Despite this account, most rock journalists continue to focus on incredibly tall tales of Jimi injecting liquid acid into his eyes (if you listen to one version) or into his penis (if you listen to another). In reality, Jimi's use was perfectly in tune with the times in which he lived.

Papa Hendrix points his finger at one particular instigator when he writes, "It seems to me that about ninety percent of the stories of Jimi's drug use were leaked to the press by Michael Jeffery." Such might be the case. Harry Shapiro, in his Jimi bio, *Electric Gypsy*, contends that Jeffery—Jimi's sometime manager—was quick to lay free stuff on his client in



VINCENT ZAPPALASTAR FILE

**'THEY DON'T KNOW
WHAT'S RUNNING
THROUGH MY BLOOD.'**

—JIMI HENDRIX



STONED & FREE

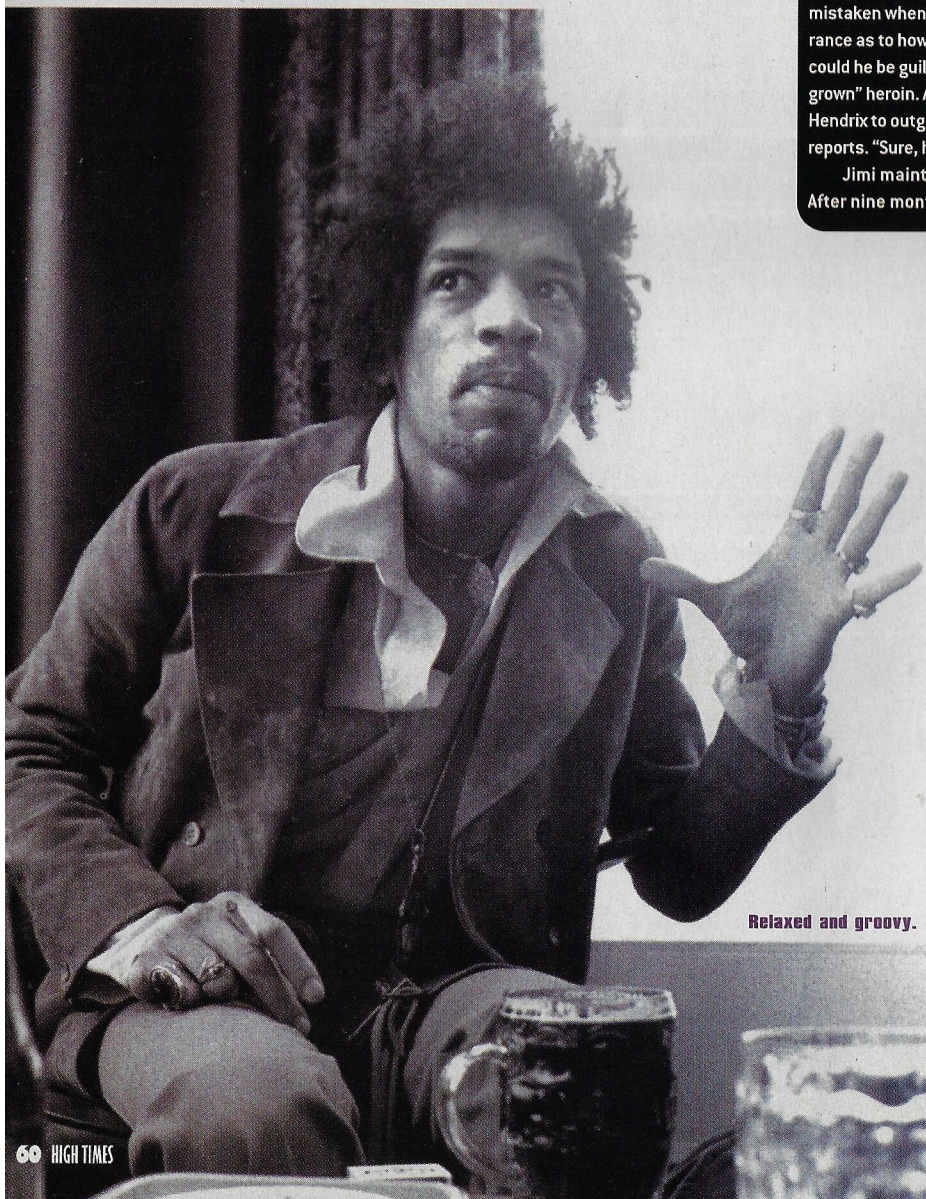
order to steer the conversation away from potentially sticky matters, like where Jimi's money was disappearing.

Experience bassist Noel Redding supports this notion in his own autobiography, *Are You Experienced?* "An acid diet provides ideal conditions for sustained freakiness. Whenever Jeffery was around, Jimi moved to the front in the freaked, tense and nervy stakes. Jeffery always made sure that Jimi was not short of drugs," he writes. "Whether this was in the name of wrong-footing Jimi or keeping him relaxed and 'groovy,' I don't know, but the effect was one of victimization."

There were, of course, the ubiquitous hangers-on, those people whose need to bask in the light of rock'n'roll fame was so intense they would follow musicians around, using any means—including free drugs—to secure their place in the scene. Other fans just gave Jimi joints as genuine tokens of affection, a way of turning him on the way he had turned them on. And sometimes, as Jimi would find out towards the end of his life, people would place drugs on him when he didn't even know it, leading to his bogus heroin bust (see sidebar).

NOT NECESSARILY STONED, BUT BEAUTIFUL

While it is almost certain that LSD was not involved in the actual recording of Jimi Hendrix's first album, *Are You Experienced?*, it would be difficult to deny the influence of its effects, especially on the title song where, among swirling backwards



Relaxed and groovy.

BARRIE WENTZEL

'Do you know "Oh Canada"?'

COME DOWN HARD ON ME, BABY

The Toronto Heroin Bust

Jimi Hendrix was only arrested once in his short but stellar career, and not for marijuana or LSD.

If you want to demonize someone for giving Hendrix the single black mark on his criminal record then, as the song goes, blame Canada. Jimi and the Experience had been warned by their roadies in Detroit that the cops might try to make an example of them in Canada. That warning became a reality on the morning of May 3, 1969, when, after being met at Toronto International Airport by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (who rarely did duty at the airport themselves, normally leaving searches up to Customs officers), Hendrix was arrested and charged with possession of heroin.

When Jimi opened his flight bag at the request of a Mountie, it revealed three bags of smack and a hash-stained pipe. After an interrogation that lasted hours, Hendrix was released on \$10,000 bail just in time to play his scheduled gig at that city's Maple Leaf Gardens that night.

The Mounties thought they had indeed gotten their man, but they were sadly mistaken when Jimi had his day in court nine months after the bust. He pleaded ignorance as to how the drugs got into his bag—and if he didn't know about them how could he be guilty? At one point he also laughingly told the judge that he had "out-grown" heroin. A friend of Jimi's, Eric Barrett, says there wasn't really anything for Hendrix to outgrow. "All the years I was with him I never saw a needle at any time," he reports. "Sure, he smoked pot, or he'd take an upper, but he wasn't a junkie."

Jimi maintained all along that he was the victim of a setup. The jury agreed. After nine months of waiting, they decided Jimi was not guilty. —E. D.

tapes, Jimi asks the album's puzzling question. It was kind of like asking if you had taken "the acid test." This was a psychedelic revolution on a 12-inch vinyl disc.

Writer Peter Relic contends that Jimi's songs had their roots in science-fiction literature far more than chemically driven hallucinations. When not playing board games like Risk in the London flat they shared, Hendrix and Chas Chandler—his mentor and manager, along with Jeffery—discussed books. Chandler told Relic, "I had dozens of science-fiction books at home. [Jimi] started reading through them all. That's where 'Third Stone From the Sun' and 'Up From the Skies' came from."

Relic maintains that "Purple Haze," Hendrix's alleged "drug anthem," borrowed at least some of its legendary imagery from Phillip Jose Farmer's 1966 sci-fi novel *Night of Light*. In telling the story of a man looking to make it through a night during which dreams come true, Farmer writes: "John Carmody shouted and dashed... through the smoke. Some tried to stop him, but he shot them down. Those in the doorway either jumped through and hurled themselves out of his path or ran back out into the purple haze."

Jimi himself said of the song: "Well, it's about this guy. This girl turns this cat on, you know, and he doesn't know which way he's going. But he doesn't know what's happening, really. He doesn't know if it's bad or good, that's all. And he doesn't know if it's tomorrow or just the end of time, for instance."

STONE & FREE

Relic points to Arthur C. Clarke's novel *The Sands of Mars* and its line, "The eastern sky was aglow with the first light of the rising sun," as the inspiration for *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*. And George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides*, he says, prompted Jimi to write tunes like "Valleys of Neptune," "South Saturn Delta" and "Astro Man."

On the other hand, there's "The Stars That Play with Laughing Sam's Dice," the goofy B-side to the single "Burning of the Midnight Lamp" (which barely cracked the Top 20 in Britain); its initials clearly add up to the psychedelic cocktail STP/LSD. Either the title was just a coincidence, or Jimi was playing a cosmic joke on an unsuspecting world.

Asked in 1967 if he used LSD to spur creativity, Jimi demurred. "If I were to take LSD, then [it's] only for my own personal entertainment," he said, "for fun or just because it pleases me."

I DON'T LIVE TODAY

Perhaps the saddest thing about the death of Jimi Hendrix is the drug myth surrounding it. Though "barbiturate overdose" is the generally accepted explanation for Jimi's death, it is not the official explanation, as the original coroner's inquest decision proves.

The initial reports of Hendrix's death were understandably sporadic and pieced together, trying to get as much of the story out as quickly as possible. But the truth was indeed made clear less than two weeks later in the British tabloid *Daily Sketch*. In the article, Hendrix's German girlfriend Monika Dannemann, who was with him the night before his death and who found his body in their hotel room the morning after he returned from a party, reported that while drugs did play a part in Jimi's death, he did not die of an overdose. Pathologist Professor Donald Teare concluded, "Hendrix had no external injuries or any needle marks in the forearm or back of the hand usually associated with drug addicts. Death was due to inhalation of vomit following barbiturate intoxication."

End of story, or so you'd think. But since "intoxication" does not necessarily imply "potential fatality," the real question concerning the possibility of Jimi's legacy as drug fatality remains. If Jimi had not died in his sleep, would he have woken up that morning and found himself dead of an overdose?

Tony Brown, author of *Hendrix: The Final Days*, writes that Hendrix reportedly took some speed at the party he attended on September 17, 1970. He also drank some wine and smoked some pot. Brown's theory is that Jimi got a little too cranked up on the speed and needed to come down a bit. After returning to Dannemann at their hotel room, the pair took Quinalbarbitone, a downer known in Germany by the brand name Vesperax, which came in packs of 10.

While Dannemann took the recommended dosage, half a tablet, Jimi initially gulped down two tablets. By the time he

THEY DON'T KNOW LIKE I KNOW The Band of Gypsies Meltdown

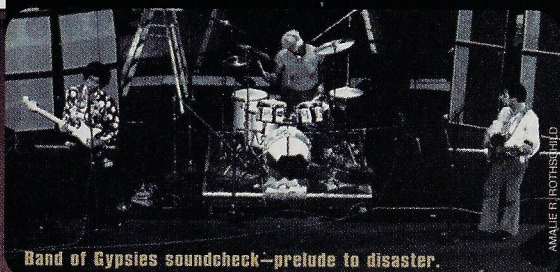
By all accounts, the final Band of Gypsies show, at New York's Madison Square Garden on January 28, 1970 at the Winter Festival for Peace, was an absolute mess. The gig lasted less than 20 minutes, with Hendrix, Buddy Miles and Billy Cox performing the songs "Who Knows" and "Earth Blues." The popular story goes that Hendrix had been given some bad acid, possibly by supergroupie Devon Wilson or manager Michael Jeffery, who didn't want Jimi to play a gig that had any political significance to it. The band tried to keep it together, but when fans began shouting for Experience hits like "Foxy Lady" and "Fire," Jimi made a rambling comment about a woman in the audience, then sat down on the stage. Miles told the audience to bear with them a minute, admitting that things still weren't quite together, but by that time, Jimi had already gone backstage, where he was seen doubled over with stomach cramps.

Former Experience bassist Noel Redding was among those who packed the Garden that fateful night, and was as shocked by what he saw as the rest of the crowd. "Somebody gave him a tab of acid just before the show," Redding claims. "He was completely freaked. And he freaked the audience and made a bad name for himself."

Johnny Winter was also at the show, which featured Paul Simon, Dionne Warwick and others. "I heard all kinds of things like he took some bad acid. Who knows? It was just real obvious that something was wrong. I really don't know if it was drugs or if he just had a bad night, but it was really scary."

Hendrix's own comments a few weeks later did not shed much light on his meltdown. "It's the end of a beginning or something," he rambled. "Madison Square Garden was the end of a big, long fairy tale, you know? Which is great, you know. I think it was the best ending I could possibly come up with. The band was out of sight, as far as I'm concerned. It was just something [to do] with head changes, going through changes. It just happened to catch me at a particular time. I was very tired. You know, sometimes there's a lot of things that

add up into your head about this and that. And they might hit you at a very peculiar time, which happened to be at that peace rally, you know, and here I am fighting the biggest war I ever fought in my life, inside, you know. And, like, that wasn't the place to do it."

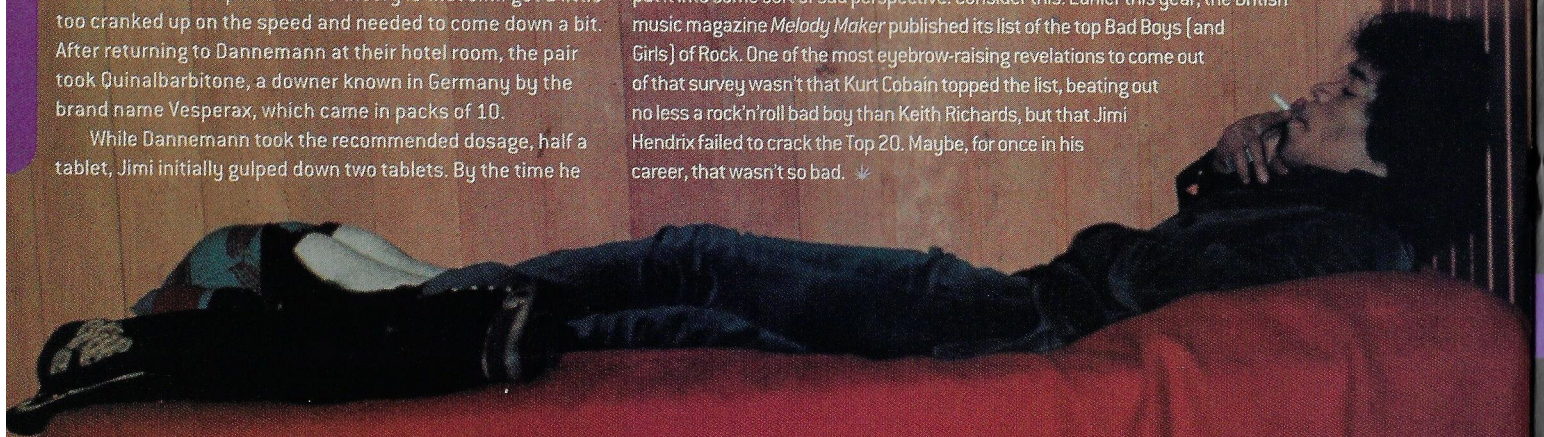


Band of Gypsies soundcheck—prelude to disaster.

was found on the fateful morning of September 18, Jimi had taken another seven pills. The coroner's office found that the level of Quinalbarbitone in Hendrix's blood was 7 mg/100ml—18 times a lethal overdose.

Jimi's death was not due to the level of drugs in his system, but to his body's reaction to them. Either the alcohol or the pills—but more likely the combination of the two—caused Hendrix to vomit in his sleep. The relaxed muscular state brought on by the downers had so compromised his gag reflex that the discharge collected in his throat simply caused him to choke to death. The only unclear aspect of Hendrix's death is the reason he took so many pills. Eric Burdon made vague allusions to Jimi committing suicide to the press in the days after his death; others scoff at that idea. And, of course, some people believe Hendrix was the victim of a murderous conspiracy. Having listed "insufficient evidence of circumstances" in its report as to whether the OD was intentional or accidental, the coroner's office shut the lid on the case with what is called an "open verdict," meaning that while Hendrix's death was not officially an overdose, it was most definitely "untimely."

Maybe the three decades of speculation, innuendo and research since Jimi Hendrix's death haven't so much whitewashed his drug history—or exaggerated it—as put it into some sort of sad perspective. Consider this: Earlier this year, the British music magazine *Melody Maker* published its list of the top Bad Boys (and Girls) of Rock. One of the most eyebrow-raising revelations to come out of that survey wasn't that Kurt Cobain topped the list, beating out no less a rock'n'roll bad boy than Keith Richards, but that Jimi Hendrix failed to crack the Top 20. Maybe, for once in his career, that wasn't so bad. ✦



PETRA NEIER/KANSAS FILE

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